The CIA Proceeds as Usual

By Norman Kempster

THE CIA FILE, edited by Robert L. Borosage and John Marks. Grossman/Viking. 236 pages. $8.95.

In September of 1974 a group of scholars, journalists and former CIA employes — most of them critics of the way the intelligence agency goes about its business — met for a two-day conference in Washington.

The discussions went virtually unnoticed by the public. The time was wrong. More than three months before The New York Times first wrote of "massive domestic spying" by the CIA, there was little general interest in the topic.

All that has changed. It seems that almost everybody is talking about the CIA — usually in an emotion-charged way that forces people to choose up sides rather than discuss the merits of the issue.

So it is probably the right time to have another look at the 1974 conference. Grossman/Viking has issued some of the conference's proceedings in the form of a series of essays. Edited by Robert L. Borosage, director of the Center for National Secrity Studies, and John D. Marks, co-author of "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence," most of the contributions have been revised to include the revelations of the last few months.

ALTHOUGH FORMER CIA Director William E. Colby's rebuttal is included, the book is clearly an indictment of many of the agency's activities.

With a few isolated exceptions, the indictment charges the agency with inadvertantly damaging the nation's best interests. There is little of the moralizing of other CIA critics. The argument is not that CIA covert activities are immoral; the argument is that they are stupid.

Morton Halperin, the former National Security Council staff member, argues, for instance, that the secrecy that surrounds CIA activities is often self-defeating. If a plan — like the Bay of Pigs — is known only to its advocates, there is little opportunity to consider the dangers inherent in it. And the intelligence reports, often from within the CIA, which might indicate the plan is a bad one are written off as the product of people who are just not "in the know."

Several of the essays review the long-term results of CIA interference in the domestic politics of other countries. The argument is advanced that even short-term advantages sometimes produce long-term liabilities.

THE BOOK OFFERS no real solutions except for the suggestion that much of what is now wrapped in secrecy could be done as well, and often better, if it were done in public.

Colby's response is weak. It was probably the intention of the editors that it be so. The agency may have some better answers to the questions posed in "The CIA File." But, if so, the public should demand to hear them.●